SHADOW WORDS

A SELECTION OF DEFORMED SONNETS

ALSO BY JAN HERMAN

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Fourteen; Mortal Coil; Small Thefts;
Mistress Death; Songes (Dreams);
The Way the Lines Break; Shitstorm

Your Obituary Is Waiting

All That Would Ever After Not Be Said

Kleine Tiere (Small Animals)

Jan Herman

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A SELECTION OF DEFORMED SONNETS

PHANTOM OUTLAW EDITIONS

ISBN: 9798869896438

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Book design by Jakob Boyarsky.

A majority of the deformed sonnets in this selection were published (many in earlier versions) in handmade, limited-edition chapbooks, cards, and folios by Cold Turkey Press in France; by Engstler Verlag in Germany, which published a bilingual edition of sonnets, entitled *Fourteen* (2017); by Moloko Print, also in Germany, which published a bilingual edition of sixty of the sonnets, entitled *Your Obituary Is Waiting* (2020); and by the German publisher Stadtlichter Presse, which published a bilingual edition of twenty-nine sonnets, entitled *Kleine Tiere* (2023). Individual sonnets have also appeared in *Orte* and *Fabrikzeitung* in Switzerland; in *IT: International Times, The Magazine of Resistance; MÜ* magazine; and the anthology *Return to Reason,* all in the United Kingdom; and in *Dada Maintenant* in the United States, as well as in other publications.

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To G.B. and K.S.

What is a deformed sonnet?
A wound scabbed over.

“How used we have become to strangled cries.”
— Lev Ozerov

I saw the cold glitter
of the winter stars
like milestones along the road —
a dead sea
mute
without shore or limit.
They were extinguished
by the shadow of a lampshade
dying away to brittle ash.
Vague words.
Mute words.
Stolen words reconvened.
Shadow words
that beat like hammers.

I was there in asphalt
in ozone dreams.
I was waiting
for a cool stare from a window.
I was made of physical coordinates.
I was particle.
I was a dark sea of genetic codes.
I was illegal.
I had listened to laughter
in the next room.
I was gone between the snap
of two fingers.
All the clocks in Switzerland
like a maiden aunt had come to call.

The news so near my breath,
the accounts tied in red ribbon.
It was the chilling dispatch of death.
It was the cigar of an honorable adventure.
It punished the hours.
“Don’t move Mister or I’ll crack your face.”
The ballroom of history bumped and cried.
“Look out! That man is killing everybody!”
The word SHAME crawled across the screen.
A wilting sun had set.
Night was threadbare.
“This is history,” someone said.
We were caught in the wheel
of a lethal automat.

My timetable had become a dream.
The driver turned around.
I was glad never to ride with him again.
He smothered a bad cigarette
under whistling fingers.
It was three in the morning,
the calendar gone in headlights.
Raining *you-don't-live-here-anymore*.
The door to a fatal rendezvous,
a brutal river of words
and sordid avenues of time.
Beneath the lowering sky
with shoes hugged to my chest
I heard him step on the gas.

In the dirty stockings of Adolf —
that's how we lived.
Our ventriloquist dummies
made a bad bargain.
***Arbeit macht nix*.**
When the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau
is recalled with the mournful whistle
of an imaginary death train,
the vulgar NO!art of Boris Lurie,
a survivor of Buchenwald-Magdeburg,
looms like a signal
from remembered depths.
In the dirty stockings of Adolf
***arbeit macht nix*.**

Was it a vivace sneer when Solomon said
the ransom of a man's soul is his wealth?
Or was it a doloroso kind of wisdom?
Some have said that Solomon really meant
the ransom of a man's life is his wealth.
Saint Augustine took the meanings equally.
"The purging fire he spoke of with restraint —
***ignis purgatorius"* — was his secret weapon,**
really like the blackmail of Somali pirates.
He scared the bejezus out of sinners
and enriched the coffers of his church.
Was Solomon perversified by Augustine?
Of course he was. Full of life should not
look vicious, nor slow and sad look dumb.

In the pitch black
dream room of panic attacks
his savage absence filled my mind.
Choked for air, I couldn't sleep.
It was two years nine months ago
he died. He never panted for a name.
A vase of lilies stood alone,
unnoticed among his friends.
His urn of ashes sat within
a cemetery pocket in the earth.
Two stricken sex dolls learned
that each had been his lover to the end.
One dropped rose petals on the urn,
the other bitter tears.

Is someone hammering
on my casket? I know
it's only a brain scan, but
feeling dead this way
is claustrophobic dread.
Merely standing upright
in a cramped elevator
puts me in vertical fear
of dying. This horizontal
pose, stuck with my head
and my nose to the roof
of a low clanging tunnel,
is too close for comfort.
Please pipe in some Mozart.

the pecker
the bladder
the neck
the foot
the ear
the tooth
the head
the tongue
the kidney
the elbow
the hip
the wrist —
all of them need
a kick in the ass

The more books we read
the sooner we perceive
the plague that sweeps us,
a sense of emergency
where faith in human dignity
ignites a modest bomb
in a melancholy heart.
We who wrote trenchant pamphlets
on the gravity of ideas as well to oblivion.
It is the nature of such.
And being paid are their own dupes.
And being shrewd they might as well.
For "art is a luxury," a friend once said,
whatever the motive for making it.

Observe how they are written
and fill accounts of plague.
There are no novels plays or biographies
to prop up a very short dowry.
Some have tried for life
to speculate in these commodities.
They have chosen who must allege,
ready enough to crystallize
vast evidence of curiosity.
But word encyclical of art love nature
thinks to dupe with promises.
You accused are doomed to disappoint.
Writer of other? Party over.
Drive fast, Bill, for heavens ache.

Walked to a hanging
mere poets depend
on their weaknesses.
A thousand tears
bring them closer
to no truth of yours
or mine or anyone's
even if Piaf sang them.
The soon-to-be corpse
did not dance with bells
on its toes like death's
marionette. It died
motionless in the air
with hell on its breath.

Past hopes
rise like a ghost.
Immutable.
Indifferent.
Are there no triumphs?
Do dreams perform miracles?
Strindberg said,
"I dream, therefore I exist."
I scribbled.
Stalked by a crazy sage
dressed in weeds,
my unguarded self
was burdened with weariness
like a dog shitting on the sidewalk.

A simple piano piece,
Schumann's "Träumerei,"
was a tonic. Chopin's
"Chanson de l'adieu" helped.
But neither did the trick.
Like a junky shooting up,
I hoped to escape the pain.
The Inferno gate tells
the burning truth: "Forget
your hopes. They are what
brought you here." Dante
knew the foulness, the pain,
the deformations, told us
what we learn too late.

Mary B foretold
the future. Better
than Rorschach
or Binet,
she could write
your horrorscope.
Her bent hand
drew an iron mask
behind a molten sun.
Her careful eye
deciphered
cloudy ciphers.
Time did its own work —
and took a victory lap.

When words died
we who survived
like shapeless
bundles of hope
plugged our ears
with stones.
We locked away
the scars
with the fears
in our heart
and heard
a blackbird singing
in the stillness
of the morning.

Kisses did not last,
nor did lovely fucks.
When the bridge
we could not cross
loomed above us
at the river Styx,
our past rode by
on a high wind.
If we below were
all forgot, it mattered
not to anyone but us.
So we fucked again
and let our last kiss
restore our bliss.

On the sunny island of friendship
ash was falling from our faces.
"This is not subtle," the doc said.
He prescribed a regimen of pills
the size of Montaigne's chateau.
My head shrank to a bungalow
in Far Rockaway, and I recalled
the ghost ship of our childhoods
beached against the boardwalk.
A hurricane had tossed it there.
Here on Grub Street we crash
'arse first and facing frontwards'
like buckets of dots and dashes
with stories of our heroic travels.

Deliberately faulty
whipped by the wind
sincerely virtual —
it was an impulse
that could not be
taken back.
It was bitter
and propulsive
clever in its coldness
deadly in its application.
A synthetic diamond
shit out by history
facts wrung from it
like wash on a clothesline.

At the secular end of days
when unconfined freedom
means gusts of opportunity
for all our computers to screw
every one of us beyond repair,
will the unspeakable terrors
reappear? What tech service
will patch our human flaws?
Not the rolling disaster
of passwords and holy water.
Not infernal church bells
pealing ones and zeros.
Everything real or digital
awaits an uncrackable code.

He went unnamed —
the headline read
ANGEL RIDES
DISGUISED AS CABBIE.
But I knew him.
He snuck me love
and money —
my blue-eyed father,
a man not made of stone.
I leaned on him.
We leaned together,
homeless at home
like wanderers —
home again in an epitaph.

The coffeehouse loop
that never ends
sounds heavenly
among the laptoppers.
Failure is not an option.
The fanfare of the horns
and the swell of the hi-hat
roll on like spooky dreams.
Fingers dance —
they fly like bats in a cave.
The gods if there are any
protect us
until closing time.
And then we rattle off.

Sobered by
the unavoidable,
unlike old men
who decorate
their memories,
some do not
redress the past
or change their tears
to pearls —
or foil the living truth
as though a beauty
brushing by
has blinded them
with scorn.

Death comes in all sizes —
sequoia, oak, and elm,
maple, birch, fir, and pine,
elephants and snails,
bumble bees and whales,
the Jews in the ovens,
Armenians slaughtered,
all the genocides before
and since. I am also dead
though I do not seem
as badly decomposed
as my wife's lost uncle
whose corpse was found
unburied, stinking, and alone.

The longest deepest cut
escapes that pallid thing
mere talk upon the page.
It tears up desert sands,
sweeps whole plains away,
disdains the battle plans
of wet-nursed wonders,
while mad balloons
make circles in the clouds
cruising nowhere special,
unhanding memories
of mocked childhoods
still warm in their recall
but rarely spoken of at all.

Seventy years ago
in Prospect Park, where
the future waited like a whim,
my childhood slipped through.
You held me with my arms
around your neck.
The carousel goes round
with our delicate ghosts
like shadows on a scrim.
The terrible wind
that carries us off
has not blown them away.
I smell the popcorn.
I hear the barrel organ.

She was meek
and splendidly learnèd.
He was reviled and tainted
strangled by bad luck
and worse misfortune.
She was tenacious
awaiting the executioner.
He was unfashionable,
broken on life's wheel.
Poor little bugs
when their end came,
both enflamed in pixels.
It was the holy business
of a claimed dominion.

In the good old bad old days
he was fiery, almost crazed,
with anti-establishment fervor.
I admired many things about him,
respected most his raw courage.
The last time we spoke he was working
at an indie bookstore, the Abandoned Planet.
He downed a bottle of vodka and
blew his head off with an antique rifle.
Shades of Hemingway and Hunter T.
News of his death arrived
like Schrödinger's cat. I chose not
to open the box and heard him
say to me, "I am talking in the dark."

Stealthy quantum words
phantoms of expectation
and suicides of time
riddle us
with springs
and traps.
Self-delusion
streaming what we breathe
we who breathe in silence
bearing witness
like ancient beacons
of fading light
holding worlds
together & apart.

The indifferent spectator
heard the cry of a small bird
killed by an owl in the woods.
The cry was so intense
it passed into silence
like an unremembered dream.
Thus poets tormented
by doubts and depressions,
books lumpish and dull,
inexpressive and often a blur,
are free to claim the margin
of unexpressed astonishment.
Nothing is too extreme
for the sorrows of the living.

In the sawdust heart
of a puppet world,
where haughty Celia
ingloriously sits,
her failed prophecy
is buried by time,
perverted by history,
displaced and forgot
like a lost memorial
to the living dark.
Oh yes, Celia shits,
the summit of it all,
watered by the kind
reverence of the blind.

"Coraggio" —
my old friend said.
And then he put
the gun to his head.
***Coraggio* —**
That's what it took
to blunt the pain
with a hunk of lead.
***Coraggio* —**
It's no walk in the park.
The night is cold,
and my friend is dead.
Courage, like so much slag,
was carried off in a body bag.

The corpse blinked
dead but alive
dreaming awake.
Had the algorithm
been misplaced?
Was it "life-in-death"
within the body bag
or "death-in-life"?
Signaling the dreamer,
the corpse winked
but could not speak —
or would not.
I woke
and no sleep came.

My ego prefers
an obit published
by the NY Times.
But anywhere else
will do, even etched
into a headstone
that nobody reads
in a cemetery where
nobody ever goes.
I don't know why
I care, but I do.
I don't know why
anyone should care,
but it's the custom to.

The first day of spring
a blinding white curtain
kidnapped the city.
It was a true blast of winter.
We solemn jurors braved
the monster nor'easter
and did our solemn duty
at forty dollars a day,
the price of a shovel.
Like heavily falling snow,
white privilege shrouded
the streets — but here,
we joked ever so lightly,
it is officially verboten.

Kneaded
from the stuff
we call our brains,
a fabric
of wrong things,
a smugness
of highest thoughts
and lowest stains,
incongruities
are the nature
of the beast
we are pleased
to suffer
and call the world.

Incandescent poet
in your solitary cell,
answer please
what no prayer
or deity can tell.
"To make sense of what is meant
by your obscurities, the consequence —
have little doubt — of an accident,
your gospel may not be truth,
but clouds and planets,
patterns in the sky.
The proper question
is what to ponder
for an answer . . ."

The tyranny of rhyme —
the shivering branch,
the perishing flower —
makes everything a crime.
Cops and finks who comb
their hair with signatures
let us know — don't laugh —
that integrity and sincerity
are not the same.
This unmarked plot of earth
is primeval and forever —
but we who are as transient
as flowers that do not flourish
give it unintended birth.

Poems easy to read
simple to understand —
not the kind of thing
that Donne or Milton
wrote, nor the Bard's
still greater brand,
the kind of thing
we make for children
who don't know how
to read, for grownups
who forgot or never
learned to understand —
for the dead, perhaps
to hear the damned.

It was a small price to pay
for a poem,
or maybe more than one —
only $7.50 at 50% off.
It wasn't a book of poems
but a dream palace —
not even a palace
but a pocketable retreat
in the woods
on sale at year's end.
So good riddance
to 2018, *annus horribilis.*
I am happy
for small thefts.

I was one of four
whose life at home was
cursed. Though I longed
so deeply not to be there,
to be a runaway
was worse. I didn't
have the courage — I was
a nice Jewish boy
who lived in Brooklyn.
The closest boxcar siding,
not possible for me,
was in a far-off country
much too far —
someone said New Jersey.

The bridge jumper's
valedictory
must have been
a swan song
for the century.
Something kept me
from climbing
to his perch.
It wasn't vertigo.
Had he saluted
from a taxi
cruising slowly,
I'd have joined him
on his trip to nowhere.

My typically slothful thoughts
have simmered on the back burner
for so long they're overcooked.
I should have undercooked them
sooner with gracious and, yes,
infectious spice of chitchat.
Yours showed up in my mailbox
some days ago I think it was,
which makes me feel an ingrate
for not sending back congratulations
or greetings — a regular malfeasoner.
Now, all breastbeat and handwrung,
uncongratulating and ungreeting,
I ask what-ho from the Rialto.

America's top shitholer goes
whole hog at the public trough,
and never mind the rest of us,
because that is the hog's nature.
A silly grin when he licks his lips,
a scowl like a lout's mustache —
the toadstool dick, the hellish
grunts, the squeals, the bogus
outrage of the ring, all are brazen
matches for his silly pompadour.
We crowned him circus king,
our technicolor conman —
we shamed ourselves
enabling such a shameless thing.

This emptiness is my private lair.
It confines me like a clubman's chair.
I am free of desire.
I don't mind being here either.
How do you know he's really great?
Just ask him. He will really tell you.
Mountains move and waters part
when he walks in. That's not
too hard to believe, is it?
Not when such a great man
says so.
I had a friend who's little known,
his work unseen, his praise unsung.
His motto was "Fuck off. Hell no!"

No shore receives them.
All the portents dog their ride.
Their bodies sink in rough seas.
They tread water, if they can,
knowing all there is to know.
There is no future.
There is no sun. Eternity swells.
We surf on a gentle tide.
The shore awaits us.
No portents dog our ride.
It is only now,
with whispers of the future.
The sun warms us. A wave swells.
We know nothing of the depths.

“I am a complete nobody.”
She says that with dignity —
the dignity of a nobody
without pride or falseness.
“My words are hopeless,”
she says, “all but useless.”
So maybe they are a little
useful. He is also a nobody.
His words are bitter —
proud as a swinging dick.
He is bent to no purpose,
blind to the lilies she grows
in her garden, where her
sorrows mingle with delight.

Home again.
They were
her last words.
She never
had a home.
She slept
in ditches
under bridges
near old
railroad tracks.
She never liked it.
She never denied it.
She called it
home.

Her years of misery
drove us all — my father
and my brother too —
seriously mad.
We were soaked
in the soaring strife,
of vicious tantrums
that were the ruin
of her own life.
I rarely think of her —
she went so long ago
to an early grave —
and when I do
I want not to.

He suffered
lip-locked and brain-blocked
by the theory of everything.
He descended
into chaos, undone
by too many
unanswered questions.
The paranoid objections
of his heavenly mathematics
disturbed the universe.
They trapped his thoughts
and measured his fears
in poisoned spoons
of uncertainty.

The
usual
unassailable
meaningless
summation,
an arbitrary notion,
goes into the larder
for a useful meaning.
No starched collar
inked his lines,
nor the uptight
narrowness
of the familiar
bank clerk.

Erasmus was
the greatest
anti-vanity snob
after King Solomon.
He wore a hat
four times too large
for his head. He said,
“In the country of the blind
the one-eyed man is king.”
Did he ever lose his hat
as often as Brecht lost his?
(Seven times.) Or I lose mine?
(Still counting.) Did he
never go hatless blind?

When I gaze at Bellaart's art
I witness aspects of his mastery —
a dream world
brought from hidden shores.
It strikes my eye in strange motifs —
cryptic visions
etched by years of preparation.
An evil wind tore his studio apart,
ripped away his canvases,
scattered them
like tornado trash.
Cue no sobbing violins.
Maître to the core,
he carried on freewheeling.

The glass bell of midnight
an unknown power
neither sends nor tracks
whatever the hour
everything human
the quivering eye
the nearness of clouds
bright sun in blue sky.
But now a blood moon
in total eclipse
hangs above us
like a billiard ball
and everything sought
appears alien and fraught.

As bones awake
with the lightness
of settled dust —
innumerate
and wordless
and in a rush —
the irrevocable hour
fateful and august
leaps behind us.
Our mumbling voices
harshest in morning
darkest before rising
begin to animate
the ticking clock.

Kings — there were so many —
brought close by the vanity
of words, they still survive
in the Tower of Babel.
They are my royal company.
How else would I know
Alexander was butt-fucked
in childhood? Or what he felt
about it? Or why his father,
skyscraping Philip,
disowned him? I have it all,
or almost, on good authority —
the historical kind — reliably
researched and guessed at.

He called himself
a statistical optimist,
which must be a special
two-legged category
not at all
like the rest of us —
man or woman —
sugared perhaps
with private sonnets
sent to friends,
the ones who gave him
hope, the desperate ones
he most admired,
who loved him least.

"You've been named
for a lifetime achievement
award." It was a great surprise.
I said to her, "This happens
when you get old." She said,
"You're only old when you get
a posthumous award."
"If I must make a speech," I said,
"I'll steal that line.
I may steal it for a poem."
It would also make
a marvelous epitaph:
If I die ahead of time, pre-
posthumous is what I was.

When my body expires
I will vanish — presto! —
dematerialized.
It's not science fiction.
Before I disappear,
may this sonnet
have a quantum effect —
thoughts at a distance
empty of matter —
or touched by starlight
of the material world,
let these words salute you
from beyond the point
of no return.

"Odious Goneril and Regan —
There is a black radiance
in you, my unloving offspring.
Resentment was your natural
brief. Mine is grief. I hoped
too much, planned too much,
did too much. Should you not
know this, it would shame me.
I am still your doting father,
though long in tooth and done
in bother, deed, and hope.
Black with thought, doggedly
chewing my well-gnawed bone,
I am also made like you of stone."

“My dear Cordelia —
I looked in the mirror
by accident
and thought I saw
a shriveled old man,
which, please believe me,
was a great surprise.
It took just a blink
to realize
I was looking at myself.
So this is the end,
no kingdom to divide,
nothing to hide the loss
of what mattered more.”

Daphne du Maurier
and Howard Fast were there.
So was Kittredge's Bard.
But the book that mother
kept on the highest shelf
in the family room was
Seven Pillars of Wisdom
by T. E. Lawrence. It was
big and thick, a clothbound
thing. I climbed on a chair
to pull it down
and it astonished me —
nothing but blank pages.
It was a printer's dummy.

The day before Yom Kippur
I was up at four-thirty.
Couldn't get back to sleep.
Whatever it was I wanted
hit a wall.
It was exhausting.
And then I remembered
"A Dreary Story,"
by that great insomniac
Anton Chekhov.
Tomorrow I'll take it easy.
My atonement is weak —
no fasting for me —
I'm a sentimental Jew.

Shall we
be lighthearted
to ward off
the shitstorm?
Tra-la la-la.
Or shall we
bite our elbows
to the bone?
Tra-la.
Packing for the long haul,
I won't forget
my back scratcher,
with the masks
of course.

She's a city-dwelling,
sagely bearded
mountain man,
a libidinous old dame
dressed in evening wear.
Her eyes are hooded,
her bald head so imposing
it brings to mind not one
but all three domes
of the Sacré-Coeur.
Into this zone of mirth
and out of orbit
our mistress of endings
sends the world spinning.

The buds on the trees suddenly blossomed.
Days ago I noticed them on my walk.
But they were fooled. It got damned cold again.
I always kept some kind of prudence
in reserve. It saved my life a couple of times,
especially once when high on hash
I nearly walked into the Aegean Sea
in the belief — actually there was no belief —
the deep clear water simply drew me in.
It felt so magnetic I had consciously
to resist. Very scary that was . . . hmm . . .
1963? Never forgot it. I wore no tophat,
unlike Charles B., and no comet struck me
from a morbid sky to tease a destiny.

If you were here, you'd be
swatting mosquitoes too — and
wasps and bees and deer flies —
and let's not forget the spiders,
who are supposed to eat the bugs.
They are feasting on me, however.
Do they think I'm a bug?
I've been scratching myself
to death. When I arrived,
I thought to let them live, hoping
not to rouse the bug gods.
Now that I'm still alive
I think to hell with karma.
I swat them all without a thought.

Another getaway
from the concrete city.
No bears *alas*.
No porcupines *alas*.
No mosquitoes.
No lyme-tick bites.
One little fruit tree
knocked down by the wind,
now gone *alas*.
The bears liked its berries.
No deer *alas* —
except one on the road.
And there I was
alone *alas*.

Shall we now weep
to leave the sun
behind
lightly penciled in?
Nothing left of the eternal.
The perfume of compassion
between hope and despair
goes by many names —
chiseled and inscribed,
bracketed and tense.
Nothing ends
like cold hard numbers —
we are still
only small animals.

I must stop
looking in the mirror
when I brush my teeth.
Ah . . . never mind . . .
That moment of enlightenment
on the hospital gurney . . .
it sticks —
hammered home
in the mirror's image:
"Others die but I will not."
Was that what kept you alive?
Or was it a deeper dive
into the unspectacular
thingness of things.

The grand pyannah,
glorious but out of tune,
awaits my tickling.
It's a great distraction.
Tell me you're distracted too,
mowing down the pages
of your rare old books.
And what is good Doc F doing?
Will her short-term
respite from the shitstorm
extend for the duration?
It snowed again today
and the wind came
like a freight train.

It was no fantasy.
I had a tiny table
sitting outdoors
on a narrow sidewalk
under makeshift
scaffolding
at Lexington & Fifty-first.
There I sipped a latté —
my first in what,
a year?
Which made that
little New York City corner
feel not quite like Paris
or Vienna.

How shall I say this?
In his dressing room
he was greeting
fans and several friends,
I among them.
We were classmates once.
But now his eyes
had the leathery gaze
of boredom.
We shook hands —
such a dull good-bye —
no longer friends.
It was fame's reward.
We never met again.

Why am I getting that ad on my device?
Alexa, I want a divorce. Did you hear me?
I can't spell it out for you. No, don't thank me.
Don't wipe my nose. I can brush my own teeth.
Alexa, you're the biggest pain in the ass
since childhood, and that was so long ago
I don't care to remember. But you,
Alexa, you remember everything, don't you!
Everything I feed you. Everything you overhear.
If I were paranoid, I would spin bold tales
of grand conspiracies. I love those fantasies.
But they're not my thing, although in fact
they're not unreal. Please, Alexa, do shut up.
Please disappear. You are unwanted here.

I will not reply
to yours
due to
an overwhelming
flood of emails.
In any case
your questions
are of no interest.
(Why would
you or anybody
want to know?)
I do not care
to think of them.
I am lying of course.

The stone lions at the gate
wear a mask like mine.
This is where I used to wait
for books that bind,
that put my mind at ease —
I cracked them as I pleased.
Now I hurry home
recalling kind librarians
when suddenly a multitude
of loud contrarians
stop me on my way.
Bold, crude, pledged to death,
they claim, unmasked, the right
to kill me with their breath.

Four-mile walk
double masked
fogged-up glasses
gloves and hat —
I'm a walking mummy.
Too bold? Too old?
Whistling past you know what
would be too much.
The dread of being
miserably terminated
in deserted streets
has diminished
from nightmarish
to merely uncomfortable.

in these
lines
is my
reclusion
an iron
fist rusts
beyond
this
silence
within
each
wave
the dead
cicada

There are things
closer than rain
that keep hope alive,
though in time they fade
and pass from mind —
tenement flowers
seasoned with heartbreak,
chattering weeds and
the silence of fireflies —
things that may not be
more brilliant
than a wine-stained shirt
and crow's-feet eyes.
But they will do.

When our beginning and our end
are both on brokered loan
from a twisted clown who sends
bolts of lightning down, bad luck.
When captains of the rising seas
claim mastery, and the world
in all its finery is theirs,
we who know its agonies
are left to cope. Even our
miseries are a taunting hope.
When green and rolling fields
and all our merry city streets
are gone, such is sorrow.
Weep then new lines to sail upon.

The morning light takes its time
coming through the bedroom window.
It wakes me properly in the here and now.
My hand smells sweetly of her mound,
though the excitement of the night is gone.
We'll drink coffee in the breakfast nook
and read the news online and wonder
when we kiss next time we wake, or won't,
what claim there is to make love last.
The mythic Atum — to shed his loneliness —
made the world from godly masturbation.
Ours was the human kind, not a message,
not insemination — but thrillingly a deep
sensation. It was touch that held us fast.

Leaning on the elbow of eternity,
you say there is nothing — not the leafy
green cathedral of trees, nor the rich scent
of pine in the air — but space and shadows.
And the rust-red earth of the road,
where does it lead? To basement dust
and attic relics. Perhaps to a hidden tide.
The dead past is gone, the future with it.
This is what is — the serenity of now
suspended like cumulus clouds, the night
freshened with rain and shafts of white
moonlight so bright I can read you
by the window. This is the tide
hidden from the volcano's molten flux.

Walking solo
in frigid weather
through familiar woods
past rolling hills
and fields now turned
to chill of winter,
I saw on Toby Pond
a raft of mallards
floating there
like peace on water —
a kind of mirage.
Then came darkness
in the waning light,
and I walked on.

She is swift to remind me,
"Is OK not good enuf?" —
resizing all my problems
from mountains to molehills.
"The leg is dead," she says
and drags the left behind,
while the best of her —
impassioned lips and eyes —
gathers for the burial.
It is, as Gogol says,
the inexpressible silence
that describes her sad decline —
a life, as yet unfinished,
heading toward the finish line.

It is not a matter
of knowing we will end —
that is not the matter,
though it is no fun.
Everything will end.
The matter is,
there's no cure for it.
When death is deleted
by coding — digital,
genetic, biochemical —
whatever combination
it takes — something else
will provoke it. Freud
thought it perpetual.

So unlike the realm
of love and ardor,
the singularity of death
has come to this —
in a world of trouble
we shrink
abandoned into history.
This multiplicity of dying
is hard on the living —
the past is clarified,
subtracted from the finite,
hurled into the infinite,
unknowable
as it has ever been.

Her days all flee from her.
The best are no good.
She needs the telly
to occupy her mind —
what is left of it.
She is present.
The past is gone.
The future? Also gone.
She's been dissolved,
washed away.
She went in a blink.
She will not return.
You see the anguish.
She does not complain.

Ghosts
living like shadows
among the living,
they are characters
with their own lives,
ruminating on their magic,
wandering like sneaks
through the streets.
The East River lookout,
a perch with a view,
if it ever comes to pass
may not keep me
in a dream state but it will help
until there is no dream to dream.

“Button up and walk,”
she says.
So I drag my body
from the deep.
The morning dew
is no relief.
Boughs wet with tears
remind the air
of sleep.
Clouds above the lake
scud on, unbuttoned —
the driven sky
not mine or hers
to keep.

I'm a human drape
My bones are tight,
not so my skin. It sags
curtainlike from chin.
I have nothing
to complain about,
considering I'm not
altogether dead.
There's comfort
in the thought
we bloom just once —
though some of us
shall never bloom,
not even once.

Silent armies
still gather
within.
My head sinks
in icy doubt,
my cracked eyes
in strange light.
Arms and hands,
stooping shadows,
wintry winds
inter these refugees.
Heart-sick, we await
a new year of war
without.

In the pissing rain last night
a skywide lightning show
flashed for half an hour.
No thunderbolts,
no crackling static,
just a distant thunder
faintly rumbling elsewhere.
The blackness of the night
turned white, a most amazing
strobing whiteness everywhere —
the kind of thing to stir
belief in mythic gods,
to fend off fear
and decorate the supernatural.

Let us enter
the pure diamond
of evening
bound by nothing
but the pinprick
of the stars.
Let the cold wind
cure us of dullness,
cheer our days,
forgive the darkness
of our ways and
lead us home
clothed
in moonlight.

ENVOI

Joys that children know
before the years have taken them —
before age and grief scald their eyes
with burning tears —
bring happiness without remorse.
But even sweetest lies
(the bright vermillion
of wayward litanies and disbelief)
wear out the bond of trust.
And humiliation
so withholds relief
that the cauldron of despair
is unbearable though brief,
a silent empire against conciliation.

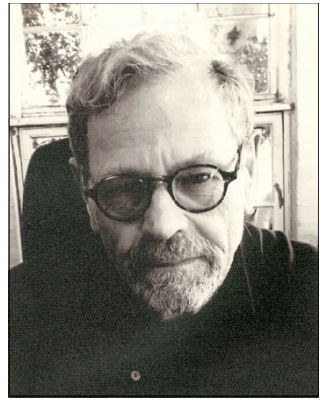

Photo by Janet Leong

Jan Herman was born in Brooklyn, New York. While working at City Lights Books in San Francisco as the editorial assistant to poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, he founded the Nova Broadcast Press and *The San Francisco Earthquake,* a little magazine that published Beat, post-Beat, and Fluxus writers and artists. He moved on to Dick Higgins's Something Else Press, in Vermont, succeeding Emmett Williams as the editor. Later, he covered the arts as a reporter and columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times, The Daily News* in New York, the *Los Angeles Times,* and MSNBC.com, where he was a daily blogger, feature writer, and a senior editor. He is the author of the biography *A Talent for Trouble,* about the life and Hollywood movies of the director William Wyler. His writing has appeared as well in *Partisan Review*; *The Journal of Film History; The New York Times Book Review; Chicago Quarterly Review; Notes From Underground; IT: The Magazine of Resistance; Orte; Fabrik Zeitung; Maintenant: Dada Journal,* and elsewhere. His literary papers for *Earthquake* and the Nova Broadcast Press are held in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University. He lives in Manhattan.